

>> OEHLKE: Good afternoon. My name is Megan Oehlke, and I work with the Career Advance Program and CAP Tulsa, and I'm here to tell you about how we use, reflect, inspect, and perfect to empower our students to create a more successful training program. Is that me? And now I can slow down.

So in 2010 we began our first group of students in a nursing pathway, and like most of you, we were focused on three core areas; that's the appropriate steps in building our career ladder, the community partnerships we would need in place in order for our students to be successful, and then those client-based support services that we anticipated they would need in order to get through our program. Many of these things will look familiar to you as we put together our beginning plans. One of the things that might look different is that we have a smaller group of students that we serve each semester, because we do intensive case management and we do a two-generational model with our parents and their children. We're looking at outcomes of both.

What we found in the beginning was that while our students could complete their first level of training, many could not progress along the pathway, and this caused us to do some reflection as to what was going on with our program. It was easy for us to look at some the things that were going well because we could just ask ourselves, "Well what's working well for us?" But the more troubling problem was what were the pieces that were not working well? For those harder-to-serve students, which were the barriers that they could not overcome, which ones were probably web-intentioned students but ill-suited for health care, and actually were our expectations too high for them?

So one of the things that we implemented from the very beginning of our program was the process of focus groups, and these are scheduled each semester. We use an outside evaluator so our students have both confidentiality and a non-judgmental atmosphere in which to share their opinions, and this is an ongoing opportunity for us to create meaningful change within our program. So we bring our students together for them to reflect upon their personal experiences and then inspect each part of our program. And these are some of the things that we asked them: What parts of the program help you succeed? What parts of the program make it difficult for you? And each of them brings their piece of the puzzle to the table, and this information is then sent upwards to our program providers, our grant writers, and those kinds of things, so that we can continue to improve and work towards perfecting our program in our pilot year.

So one of the key factors and success for a focus group is that our students have to actually see tangible results from their feedback. And for many of our students this is their first opportunity to actually evaluate their own personal academic needs and advocate for change. So in the things that we have been able to institute because of our focus groups, we've moved training steps that actually have no relevance to the students whatsoever. We have added additional training opportunities, and we've added non-nursing pathways to meet our student needs. We've incorporated more remedial classes based on their feedback that they need more help. We're continually reviewing our program policies for relevance, and we've also added a new financial education part of our program for the students' toolbox. But I'd like the students actual comments from focus groups to speak for themselves.

I've been out of school for so long it's different now. I'm actually focused on school this time. I'm more willing to talk to a teacher, and I'm not worried about negative peer pressure. You better have a good support system and then a backup plan for your backup plan. I'm showing my children it's never too late to return to school and that education is important. I was going to give up, but my coaches wouldn't let me. I had really low self esteem, and I really doubted that I could get in, but someone else believed in me. The extra core class prepared us for college classes, and it showed me that I could do this. You have to really want this. You have to work for it. The teachers need to be more effective. They need to know how to learn to work with adults that have different learning styles.

So based on the feedback that we've gotten over the several years we've had our HPOG grant, we have changed our initial expectations. We now admit more students per semester into multiple pathways. We expect them to take longer to complete the pathways we had originally planned. And while we have all these working parts put together, what we continue to do in Tulsa is to build upon our past experiences to create a future with better outcomes for all of the students who are involved.

So one of the things that I hope that you could see, if you were to implement one of these things or the focus groups in yours, is that the focus group experience can translate into program improvements in real time for your sites, improved self-advocacy for the adult students themselves, and a sense that they have the power to not only improve their future but their children's. So as you're reflecting and inspecting and trying to perfect your programs, we encourage you to consider focus groups as a possibility so that you might enjoy some of the student empowerment that we see in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Thank you very much.